

[The Man Who Was]

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SOUTH CAROLINA FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT

TITLE: THE MAN WHO WAS —

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Name of Person Interviewed H.L. Harper

Place Charleston, S.C.

Address 264 King Street

Fictitious Name John Remington

Name of Writer F. Donald Atwell

Name of Reviser State Office

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I ran into him on the third floor (back) in a cheap rooming house on K Street-a one-eyed, disheveled remnant of a man nearing middle-age. His suit was worn and baggy, and his shirt looked as though it had not been laundered since it was bought.

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"Touch you for a little sniffer, Buddy? His voice wheezed. He leaned closer. "Been on a bounder for two days, trying to straighten up, need a little shot to brace me," he added by way of explanation.

"Okay" I said. "Let's drop in Joe's I'll just have a beer-off liquor for good."

With a stiff drink under his belt, my new acquaintance brightened. His hands became steady and his eye kindled with a new light. "Name's Remington - John Remington." He gazed at the table-top, and twirled his glass.

"All right," I said, "let's have it."

"It's a long story, Buddy.

"Let's have it." I said.

"Well, I was barn on a farm up in Spartanburg County, 48 years ago. When I was fifteen, I left the farm and came to Spartanburg where I got a job in a cotton mill there. Then came the war. I was hardly more than a kid, and I listened with my mouth open at those preachers prating on what a glorious thing it was to die for one's country, although I noticed later that none of them ever shouldered a gun.

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I volunteered. We hadn't been over there two weeks before they pushed our outfit up to the front. It wasn't the fighting that got me. It was the horses. Yessir, Buddy, the horses. I just couldn't stand those awful screams and pitiful wails. of artillery horses shot to pieces out there and dying in agony. You could hear 'em out there panting and whining so pitifully. Buddy, it tore my nerves all to pieces.

"I got mine at Chateau Thierry. Thirty wounds, and gassed." Here, Remington opened his shirt to prove his assertion. His chest was a mat of scars. "Just a part of 'em, Buddy,

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there's plenty more on my back." He buttoned his shirt and reaching in his pocket extracted a card and extended it to me. "There, that entitles me to all of \$34 dollars a month for saving the world for democracy."

"At any rate, that's all I get. But somehow I can't cuss Roosevelt even if he did hold out on the Bonus. He's saved this country from revolution. That's certain even if people do call him a spendthrift. Why, you know and I know in 1932 this country was well on the way to a civil war similar to that in Spain. Roosevelt did what he could, I suppose. He spent it, but he saved us. It's easy for 'em to cuss him now, but it's not settled yet. What'll happen when he goes out? I'm no politician although I vote. I'd vote for Roosevelt again, I guess, if he was to run.

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"But that's getting away from my story. When I came back to the states, everything seemed strange and different. I managed to get a job with the Southern Railway, firing. Then I ran local freight. Finally, I had a passenger run out of Hamlet. I was making a good salary. I averaged nearly three hundred a month. Then, I got married. Married a girl named Mamie Bouknight from Hamlet. Buddy, it was a case of adoration I suppose you'd call it. I worshipped the ground she walked on. All the mess and horror of the war was behind me, and I was happy. Happy then, Buddy. Me nor Mamie either had had much in life, and we decided on a beautiful home in Hamlet to start us off. I got to where I'd spend every spare minute after my run, working around the place. Mamie would keep busy with her house and flowers, and I'd work the garden and fix things. I got where I loved to piddle in the house and outside. I was always building something, or fixing fences, and sowing lawns and a thousand other things.

"Those were the happiest years, Buddy, but it didn't last long. Mamie came in from uptown one day complaining of a pain in her side. By night, she was running a high fever and I was nearly crazy. I had the best doctors in Spartanburg, told 'em not to mind the cost, just

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save her life. Old Dr. Wesson, who had been our family doctor, told me it wasn't a matter of expense, it was pneumonia.

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"When she died, Buddy, it finished me. I never realized how much she really meant to me until she was gone. I used to go out to the cemetery on summer evenings and just sit on the green sod by her grave and talk to her. I'd tell her how beautiful the flowers were and how pretty the big magnolia blooms were in the magnolia tree over her grave.

"From then on, my health went down. I got worse and worse, and finally, I lost out with the railroad. I couldn't stand the stiff examination. I came on to Charleston, more by chance than anything else, and I nearly died from loneliness. I didn't have anything to do and I was miserable.

["I?"] managed after a long time to get work clerking in a mall grocery store down on B - street. It didn't pay anything hardly, but it kept me busy.

"Then they paid the bonus. I got about five hundred dollars, and a widow with one child at the same time. I had met her when she came in the store one morning, and I took a liking to her. It had been five years since Mamie died, and I felt that she would want me to marry again. I dropped around occasionally to see this widow, and when I got my bonus, well, we got married..

"But Buddy, when that bonus money finally ran out, things changed. It went from bad to worse. It got so I couldn't come in the house.

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If ever a man lived in hell with a woman, I did. I found out that she had spent two years in the Asylum in Columbia. She would suddenly have those mean, crazy spells of hers, and it nearly drove me crazy. I saw a lawyer about it, and he said quit her and got a divorce. I didn't have the money so we're still married, but I dont mess around there any. She got

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some kind of job with the WPA, I think. I did send a big order of groceries Christmas day, but they didn't invite me to dinner. All I had was a hamburger and a cup of coffee.

"I'm thinking about going down in Florida to live out the rest of it. I kinda look forward to the time when I'll go to Mamie, God rest her soul. I use to wonder if there was a heaven, but I know now if we live after we die, I want to go where she is, because where she is, well, its got to be heaven.

I guess you'd just call me a man who was, because that's what I am. I just hope when I get with her that He'll give us a beautiful home together where I can tinker again, and live like I did those few happy years that seem to long ago."